

POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS.

"All nations have their omens drear,
Their legends wild of woe and fear."

TRADITION has ever been a faithful chronicler of the sayings and doings of vulgar philosophers. The babbling tongues of sire and son have wafted over the wreck of ages, ceremonious rites, omens, superstitious observances, and other self-tormenting notions from the confusing shadows of antiquity; and in their passage over a long succession of centuries an earnest assurance is given of a still extended duration.

The Vulgar Philosopher of two thousand years ago is thus described by Theophrastus, the pupil of Plato and Aristotle:—"He is a man," saith our Greek authority, "who, having

washed his hands and sprinkled himself all round, leaves the Temple with a laurel leaf in his mouth, with which he walks about the whole day. If a weazle crosses his path he will not advance a single step until he has thrown three stones over the road. If he finds a snake in his house he rears a place of devotion on the spot. He will not sit upon a grave, or touch a dead person. He is anxious about the interpretations of his dreams. He purifies himself with onions, and when he sees a mad or epileptic person, he spits in his bosom." Such was the description of a superstitious man in the days of Plato; and in the present boasted age of

civilisation and diffused intelligence, he is much the same, for, if we were to imitate the style of Theophrastus, we should thus describe the superstitious man of the nineteenth century:—"He is as anxious as ever about the interpretation of his dreams. At dinner he considers it unlucky if he happens to spill the salt, and if such an accident befall him, he flings three pinches of it over his left shoulder. He will not pass under a ladder. He dislikes to meet a squinting woman. He will not commence a voyage by sea on a Friday. He advertises in the *Times* for a child's caul, as a preservation against drowning and shipwreck. He hangs a charm round his child's neck. He will not allow himself to be weighed, for if he does he fears his shadow may be less. He places faith in odd numbers—all his remedies are swallowed at intervals of three hours. He sets his hens upon an odd number of eggs; but he will not sit down to dinner when thirteen persons are present. Breaking a looking-glass denotes a death in his household. He turns his money mysteriously at the new moon. He puts his trust in an old horse-shoe. He delights in the fortune-teller," &c. &c. However, we stop here, for it would be both tedious and humiliating if we gave utterance to all the wild dogmas of "Vulgar Philosophers." There is no department in creation from which they have not with subtle skill drawn some delusive notion—some mode of self-torment. Like the spider, they suck poison from the same flower from which the bee extracts honey.

It would appear, indeed, that mankind are destined to be permanently ridden by the night-mare of some alarming apprehension, for even now, in the middle of the nineteenth century, there are many who consult the mystic oracles of our ancestors, and they rarely fail to extort from their superstitions fears the slavish obedience exacted by custom and antiquity. Even Napoleon the First believed, or affected to believe, in the "*Star*" of his destiny." What the meaning of the phrase is we do not profess to comprehend, any more than we do the thousands of whims and fancies, and cobwebs of the brain, that have floated over the ruins of buried ages, and preserved a form and figure that may be recognised amid the matter-of-fact occupations of the present day.

When we read of the magic of modern science, of the wonders of steam, of railroads, of that unceasing marvel the electric telegraph, it is difficult to comprehend the extensive range of the wild superstitions of by-gone times. Many, however, still remain, for although the sorcerer, the magician, the masterfiend, and the necromancer have faded away before the light of truth and reason; still the public mind hankers after mysteries and wonderments. The gaping crowd still runs after exciting food, and gazes with undiminished pleasure upon "beautiful mermaids," performing jugglers, giants, dwarfs, and enchanted girdles. It is true that the "Wizard" of the North now only exerts his mysterious agencies to amuse our leisure; and instead of holding our minds in terror, practises his craft for the especial delight of the rising generation. Yet we can easily imagine that if the mental atmosphere of our times was a shade or two darker, the same species of legerdemain, so harmlessly exercised by Monsieur Robin and other necromancers, would be wielded with desolating force by a Dr. Faustus and Cornelius Agrippa to enslave and terrify the ignorant and vulgar.

The idea of telling fortunes is very pleasant, and the variety of "Sybil's leaves" that may be bought at our toy-shops, shows how striking a part in the history of human nature is the passion of prying into futurity. It is found amongst the rudest, as well as the most civilised of nations; and it may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind to see the remains of this thirst after hidden knowledge among the more unenlightened of our own.

It cannot be denied that the monastic legends were powerful aids to vulgar philosophy in fostering the growth of superstition. The monks were in many instances most dexterous cheats, and they had plenty of leisure to devise schemes to work upon the imaginations of the ignorant.

"A Bone from a saintly Anchorite's cave,
A Phial of Earth from a Martyr's grave,"

were speedily by them endowed with miraculous properties, and in due time became subjects of some marvellous history, and vulgar belief fostered and exaggerated the delusion. By these means (perhaps unwittingly) they hatched superstition under the warmth of their devotion, and engrained upon the minds of future generations a disposition to believe in the wonderful and the supernatural.

Superstition has from time out of mind retained the intellect in bondage, stopped inquiry, and retarded science. At no distant date any of the achievements of our modern engineers, chemists, and philosophers would have been ascribed to magic. Let us bear in mind that the penal statutes against the practice of witchcraft were blotted from the laws of England so late as the close of the last century, leaving the remembrance of their existence a gaping wonder; and it is to be hoped a salutary warning to a people whose ancestors paid the penalty of thirty thousand lives, as a sacrifice to ignorance, upon the bloody altars of superstition.

It is true that we do not now practice sorcery, magic, or the black art, neither are wizards or witches burnt at the stake; but may not the superior intelligence of some not very distant day detect in the hocus-pocus of clairvoyance, second-sight, spirit-rappings, and table-turning, a system of cunning fraud, quite as humiliating in a matter-of-fact and scientific age as any of the *diablerie*-incantations and necromancy of the *charlatans* of the middle ages. Indeed the prevalence of the most absurd opinions on table-moving, table-turning, and the swinging of the "Bible and the key," even amongst what are called "cultivated" people, proves, as Professor Faraday remarked in the *Times* newspaper, "that there must be something radically wrong in our system of education." We are also reminded that the credulous spirit which creates and fosters witchcraft, and such abominations, has its intermittent fits of excitement; and still lingers in certain dark holes and corners of the land, where invincible Ignorance sits mumbling charms, has a realm of shadows of its own, peopled with ghosts, spectres, and goblins, believes in sea-serpents, sweating statues, bleeding pictures, and other visions of the imagination.

In endeavouring to trace the source from which the superstitious notions and ceremonious rites of a people spring, we must in many instances despair of reaching the fountain-head. The stream has been running from time immemorial, and the most that can be achieved is to navigate its course upward as far as possible, leaving the head waters and the distant countries through which it flows in doubt and conjecture. We do not intend sailing on such a voyage of discovery, but shall content ourselves with briefly noticing such of these self-tormenting notions as still retain their influence on the public mind at the present day, and as coming more directly under the title of Vulgar Philosophy.

For instance, there is scarcely an individual to be found who has not at some period of his existence placed more or less faith in omens, and which, according to those skilled in superstitious lore, is defined as an indication or warning of some future event, of which we obtain the knowledge by accident, or without design or premeditation. And here let us add, that a belief in omens occasionally produces considerable mischief, and certainly increases ignorance and folly, for the evil omens which our ancestors have bequeathed to us fill a catalogue infinitely more extensive than the good. It is, however, one of the triumphs of modern knowledge, that we can look with perfect indifference upon much of the

ridiculous rubbish which filled their minds with the greatest anxiety. Yet much remains to be done in directing the cream of modern intelligence against that portion of the great bank of prejudice and superstition which still remains, obstructing the onward flow of mental energy in search of truth.

Spilling salt is one of the most popular symbols in Vulgar Philosophy. It is universal in Europe, and amongst the Arabs, the Persians, Mahomedans, and Hindoos, in fact, all over Asia, and in such parts of Africa as are known, this superstition is yet in full activity. It has been, indeed salt now is, amongst many nations used as symbol of evil tidings; others consider it a token of hospitality and a type of purity and immortality. According to those who are skilled in spectral learning, salt not being liable to putrefaction, and preserving things seasoned with it from decay, is an emblem of eternity and immortality, and mightily abhorred by infernal spirits. In reference to this symbolical explication, "how beautiful," says Mr. Brand, in his "Popular Antiquities," "is that expression applied to the righteous, 'Ye are the salt of the earth!'" The custom of placing a platter of salt upon the head of a dead person agrees with the idea that salt was considered the emblem of the incorruptible part, the body itself being the type of corruption.

At the table of our old barons and country squires there was formerly a division formed by a huge salt-cellar, and the rank and consequence of the visitors were marked by the situation of their seats above or below it. This custom not only distinguished the relative dignity of the guests, but extended likewise to the nature of the provisions; the wine circulating only above the salt-cellar, while the dishes below it were of a coarser kind than those near to the head of the table.

To these instances of the relation that salt bore to the dead, and as a mark of distinction at meals, should be added that salt was used by the Jews in all sacrifices, hence the "Devil is supposed to love no salt in his meat." There is also no doubt that salt, being considered of an incorruptible nature, was for this reason made an emblem of friendship; and if by accident any was spilt between two persons, it was thought that their friendship would not be lasting. Modern philosophers still feel the effect of this venerable superstition; but they have invented an antidote, which consists of "three pinches of the spilt salt flung over the left shoulder." Our young readers are requested to observe that this statement is not made to amuse the mind, or create wonder, for this superstitious observance is still practiced by ignorant people, and in the last century was credited, or affected to be credited, by those who ought to have known better.

Breaking a looking-glass creates in the minds of many persons a belief that a death of some near relation will take place in the course of the year. This mode of self-torment is supposed to have arisen in consequence of mirrors being formerly used by magicians, and sorcerers, and other cheats, in their diabolical operations. There was also a kind of divination or mode of foretelling events, practiced by astrologers and cunning men, in which the looking-glass was used. As may be imagined, they were regarded by the ignorant, in consequence of forming a part of the apparatus in use on such mysterious and solemn occasions, with superstitious dread and awe; and to break one was, therefore, considered to be a great misfortune: and it is supposed that, from the feelings engendered by the mysterious jugglery of these impostors, the present popular notion was derived.

Vulgar Philosophy is particular about its New Moon Customs. That the disciples of this ancient sect are justly entitled to be considered lunatics, may be inferred from the following incident, which occurred at a party within a year, and at the residence of a gentleman of considerable station

in society:—In the midst of a social chat, at the close of the day, a footman rather briskly entered the drawing-room, and walked up to the back of the chair of the hostess and whispered something in her ear; she immediately closed her eyes and gave her hand to the man, and was forthwith led by him from the room. The guests were rather astonished, but after the lapse of a few moments the lady returned and resumed her seat.

Her sudden departure having occasioned a rather uneasy pause in the conversation, she felt it necessary to state the cause of her singular conduct. She then told us that the New Harvest Moon had just made its appearance, and it was her custom to give a crown to any of her servants that first brought the information to her when that event occurred; and that the reason why she closed her eyes, and was led by the footman out of the room to the open air, was, that she might avoid the evil consequences that were sure to happen to her if she obtained her first glimpse of the Harvest Moon through a pane of glass. This lady was highly accomplished, and possessed remarkable sagacity upon most subjects, but was nevertheless a slave to a groundless fear of evil befalling her if she saw this particular New Moon in any other way than in the open air.

In Scotland, especially among the Highlanders, the women make a curtsy to the New Moon; and in England, upon the borders of Wales, it is the custom of the peasantry to salute the New Moon, sitting astride upon a gate and say—"A fine moon, God bless her!"

Among the many New Moon Customs—such as looking through a new silk handkerchief, to ascertain the number of your lovers; feeling for money in your pocket, to see if you will have a lucky month—none is more pleasant than that of claiming the first kiss for a new pair of gloves. The person in company who first gets a glimpse of the New Moon immediately kisses some one in the company, and claims a new pair of gloves. This, it must be admitted, is one of the customs practised by philosophers of this sect, that is both felicitous in effect and operation.

Friday is a remarkable day with superstitious people, particularly with sailors. They consider it unfortunate for commencing a voyage; and this self-tormenting notion arose from the fact that the Redeemer was crucified on that day. It was the custom of our ancient mariners to obtain the good wishes of the Church previous to going to sea; and it is conjectured that the priesthood, in order to enforce a strict observance of their religious rites, forbade all vessels starting on a Friday; and any seaman who was hardy enough to set their rules at defiance was considered to be likely to meet with foul weather and contrary winds. In order to break down this superstitious notion—which is still very prevalent—a ship-owner in the north, some years back, laid down the keel of a new ship on a Friday, and so contrived that she was completed on a Friday—he had her launched on a Friday—he then christened her Friday, on a Friday—had her commanded by a Captain Friday—and despatched her on her first voyage on a Friday—and, strange to say, she was never heard of again! Vulgar Philosophers make much of this; but they forget that Columbus sailed from Spain on a Friday—discovered land on a Friday—and returned to the port of Palos, where he sailed from, on a Friday. This curious coincidence should have sufficient weight to dispel, especially with American mariners, the superstitious dread, still so prevalent, of commencing a voyage on that ominous day.

A mother, in the *Spectator*, is made to say, in alluding to the superstition of Friday being an unlucky day to commence any new work upon—"No, child, if it please God, you shall not go into join-hand on a Friday."

Odd numbers have always been thought to possess a decided advantage over even numbers. "There is luck in

odd numbers," says Rory O'More; and to this day it is held to be sound philosophy to put an odd number of eggs under hens for the purpose of breeding. There is also a decided preference given to odd numbers in saluting Kings and other great persons with cannon; according to the dignity of the potentate, so are an odd number of guns fired. They are never saluted with an even number of guns. Admirals, Generals, Ambassadors, and Princes, are done homage to with either nine, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, or nineteen guns; while a Royal salute is a double dose of odd numbers, or three times seven, or twenty-one guns. All sorts of remedies are taken three, seven, or nine times. Three handfuls of salt cast over a dead body had, with the Romans, all the virtues of a funeral. In short, there appears to be no end to the good qualities of odd numbers. There is, however, one occasion when thirteen is considered eminently bad; and no true disciple of Superstition will sit down to dinner if he discovers that exactly thirteen persons are present. One of the party is certain to die before the year is out if he does. It has been surmised that the Paschal Supper was the origin of this notion, for thirteen persons were present then; and it is impossible to forget what followed that repast.

Notwithstanding the flood of information which has been poured over the country during the last half century, Superstition, at once the child and mother of Ignorance, still holds considerable sway over the mind. It is true that the days of ghosts and apparitions are nearly over, but futurity is as tempting as ever. The seventh son of a seventh son is still potent enough to charm away the money and bewilder the senses of the credulous. It is amazing how in this nineteenth century so many statements appear in our police reports of individuals being duped by Card Prophets and Fortune-tellers, and that the magistrates should still have to commit these modern soothsayers to the treadmill and the House of Correction, for their pretended squinting into futurity. It is not the uneducated alone that resort to these impostors, it is too well known that many recent examples of persons moving in good society have sought the assistance of a Zadkiel, who would perhaps blush openly to acknowledge that they ascribed any weight to such magical pretenders. The Gipsy still lives, however, upon the credulous and the foolish, and one ought not to wonder that she does, for it is only necessary that one party should be a knave and the other a fool to ensure complete success, and no one can deny that such meetings very frequently occur. We can scarcely believe Voltaire, when speaking of these pretenders, when he states that above 100,000 of them have been executed in Europe for practising magic. True Philosophy alone has at length partly cured men, and women too, we hope, of this abominable delusion; at all events it has taught our judges that they should not burn the insane.

There is an old legend still lingering in the minds of the peasantry of England, Ireland, and Scotland, and of entire Europe, that old horse-shoes are a protection against evil spirits, witches, banshees—in short, that they are a shield and buckler against the whole tribe of demons. How frequently we see them nailed to the cottager's door, and on boats and vessels of all denominations. A most remarkable instance of this singular delusion occurred at Holly Lodge, the suburban retreat of the late Duchess of St. Albans, where the visitor, on entering the tastefully-arranged garden, saw rare plants from every climate, and his senses were gratified with their varied tints and delicious perfume. It seemed a fairy Eden. Passing on towards the mansion, through a labyrinth of rich parterres, and beautiful statues, the visitor came to a flight of steps leading into a sumptuous drawing-room, and composed of the purest marble. A statuary would have sighed at beholding such beautiful slabs put to such a purpose. But upon the last step there was an

eyesore of another kind, for upon the white marble there were two old rusty iron horse-shoes staining its beauty with red streaks of defilement, offering a singular contrast to the harmonious taste and elegant refinement that characterised everything else in its locality.

The strange superstition of a cast shoe (for we believe the charm is destroyed unless the shoe is flung from the hoof) opens a large and perplexing field of inquiry. It seems to have pursued its triumphs with bold marches, and exercised a marvellous influence over the human mind. Its origin, too, is as obscure as its belief was and is extensive. The common supposition is, that it was elevated into a symbol when Witchcraft and Sorcery were fanned into activity by the designs of the cunning pretenders of magic, and was adopted by the weak and the helpless as a potent charm to dispel their incantations. Like the superstition respecting the sound of bells, which our ancestors believed drove away demons, evil spirits, dispelled storms, and appeased the wrath of Heaven, an old horse-shoe had its own virtues and charms, and which seems to have lingered in the minds of men long after true philosophy had stormed the last strongholds of those gigantic idolatries and superstitious practices that disfigured the Middle Ages.

The mental atmosphere must have been dark and gloomy in which such delusions as the above could have been practiced with success. And but that it would be more humiliating than instructive, instances of superstition even more absurd than any here mentioned could be cited as having exercised all but unlimited sway over the credulous masses. The Vampyre Superstition of last century—the belief in the Evil Eye—the prophecies of Johanna Southcote, of Nixon, and Mother Shipton still find believers, and the advertising columns of the utilitarian *Times* still occasionally announces that a "Child's caul that has performed three voyages round the world may be had for twenty guineas." These are convincing proofs of the laborious apprenticeship which the intellect has to serve, before it arrives at the comparative state of perfection it has now attained, and renders it a curious as well as profitable subject of inquiry to discover what faculty of the mind gives rise to the wild and visionary notions connected with superstition.

Is it because the generality of men are more disposed to exercise the faculty of Wonder, than to exert their reasoning and reflective qualities? For Wonder has been aptly compared to a lever, by which the sagacious few have moved the ignorant many for ages past. And although no portion of the intellect is more beneficially employed for man than Wonder, when in its legitimate state, yet, if not kept under proper control, it has its terrific impulses, its wild bewilderments and delusions. Blinded by its frenzied excitements the mind then sees

"More spirits than vast hell can hold;"

and even steady and sober intellects have been hurried into excesses, when labouring under the stupefaction produced by licentious wonder. In this state of mental intoxication the reason is dethroned, and wildly chases every phantasm that crosses the imagination, and inflicts upon itself self-torments, while like the order of Flagellant Monks, who make vellum of their own skins, whereon with whips they write their follies with a bold hand, so Vulgar Philosophers lash their minds with a scourge composed of omens, phantoms, and "chimeras dire," that inflict self-torments as full of anguish as any produced by the mistaken piety of monkish zeal. Of the two delusions, perhaps the priests have the advantage, for by their self-torment they gain a character for sanctity, whereas the mental flagellants scourge themselves for shadows, and are laughed at for their pains.